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A Postmodern Critique of the Virtual University

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Introduction

The issues that we are considering at this conference on the Virtual University are critical for the future of higher education both in Japan and the US. In this regard I will begin my presentation by addressing the role of education in a democracy and the role the state plays in this relationship. Next, I address the social function of higher education and the problems inherent in this present structure. Third, I question the purpose of the Virtual University and the class-based problems I find in this approach to higher education. Finally, I look at higher education's virtual future and conclude with questions that should be considered in assessing this future.

Education in a Democracy

Central to understanding the role education plays in a democracy is the tension between its reproductive and democratizing functions. On one hand, education has responsibility for ensuring the workforce and current structure of a society are replicated, but on the other hand, creating citizens who question the existing norms and culture is also a critical function of education. Education typically moves between one side (reproduction) and the other (democratizing), depending on the view of the state and its leaders. Herein, the state always has a key function to play in how education is funded, its social purpose, and larger role in society. Not only does the state mediate between the reproductive and democratizing nature of education, but also between the public and private good and the individual and collective benefits of education.

Who benefits from education and the function this knowledge plays in society to alleviate social and economic problems are also vital functions of education. Institutions of education, particularly universities, provide a production and preservation role for national and global culture and knowledge. This knowledge can have both an individual benefit and a public one and can support the current social norms of modernism or the new emerging norms of postmodernism. The distinction for education between modernism and postmodernism can be thought of as differences between modernist, scientific, and neoliberal philosophies, whereas postmodern elements of education are humanistic and multicultural. Distinctions are often made also between colonial and postcolonial theories where the old-world hegemony of conquering nations and European modernism stand in contrast to national sovereignty and independence of the developing world.

Education, as Paulo Freire believed, is a political act. Giving the power of knowledge to landless peasants and uneducated workers usurps the hegemony of the colonizer or the "oppressor", in Freire's terms. Within this political context is consideration of the role the state plays in promoting and using education, often as an ideological arm, as Althusser proposes. The state may use education as a compensatory commodity or a welfare gift to reward citizens for adherence to the rules and laws of the state; that is, those who abide by the demands of the state will be rewarded with an education. When used as a commodity by the state, education helps produce and inculcate the national culture and protect national sovereignty. In its most modernistic form, state-run education distributes knowledge and rewards it to those who are most deserving. High status knowledge, taught at universities, is often available only to the aristocracy, whereas technical knowledge

is provided for the working classes to help reproduce the existing class structure. The intent of postmodern or postcolonial concepts of education is to distribute education at all levels to those most motivated, knowledgeable and deserving and to preserve the culture and national sovereignty that promotes equity and social justice for all citizens.

Determining who should benefit from education and who owns the knowledge leads both to national and global tensions over the private vs. public rewards of education. The state must determine the degree to which education should play primarily a cultural and democratizing role for the society or a reproductive and capital accumulation role. How much should education produce knowledge (research) compared to inculcating culture (teaching)?

Contemporary Problems of Education

Understanding the appropriate role of education for a society is often a highly contested issue. Because education is expensive, particularly high status education, it is a scare commodity that cannot, typically, be distributed to everyone in a society. The US, however, has come closest, perhaps, to a model of mass distribution of education. The "massification," as it is called, does lead to problems, however. Aronowitz criticizes US higher education for being a "knowledge factory," where, because quality is of little concern, universities manufacture students like automobiles on an assembly line. Similarly, Slaughter and Leslie see contemporary US higher education as being driven "academic capitalism." Because of neoliberal shifts in funding priorities of the state to support the private good, government support of research focuses on what benefits the military industrial complex. Such notions of capitalism that are driving contemporary higher education reward entrepreneurial activity at the university at the expense of disinterested research, cultural preservation, and access to higher education by disenfranchised groups.

For every democracy, access to education by the total population is a key issue in preserving citizenship. When education is used only as a compensatory commodity, access to education becomes a highly contested issue by the social classes who are denied or given limited access. Certainly, the distribution and access to education is a class-based issue with considerable ramifications for the future of a nation's citizens. With the rapid and ever expanding improvements in educational delivery systems through the internet, satellites, cellular phones and cable systems, potential access to education has vastly increased. Even with these advances in educational technology, someone must deliver and manage these educational resources. Education still remains a scarce commodity because not everyone can afford or gain access to the technology and to the institutions and teachers who deliver the education. Education is not simply a technological problem. Officially designated educational institutions must still develop the educational curriculum, create and manage the delivery software, teach and facilitate the course, and then insure and maintain academic integrity of the curriculum. A critical problem still remains, however, and that is providing individuals with the means to access this new technology. One potential solution to this problem of increasing access to high status knowledge of universities is to provide it virtually over the Internet through what is now known as the Virtual University.

The Virtual University

Although the focus of our discussion today is on Japan's Virtual University, I will use the US as an explanatory case study from which to understand VUs. In the US purpose of the Virtual University (VU) is typically threefold: 1) to expand access, 2) to increase institutional capacity, 3) to make a profit. First, as discussed, the VU provides increased opportunity for students to gain access to high status knowledge, particularly for those students who lack sufficient funds to attend a residential campus, live in

rural areas that prevent easy access, or any other number of social or personal issues that impede their access to a traditional, on-campus higher education. Second, institutions and the state are also interested in the VU as a method to increase capacity in programs and access by students. The motives for the state are often more political and economic than educational; that is, by increasing institutional capacity the state gains the favor of individuals denied access to traditional forms of education. This has very much been the case in Thailand where the Open University was developed to serve the needs of students denied access to the traditional state universities. Of course, as I discuss below, the provision of the Open University or VU does not typically increase capacity or access to the top tiers of higher education. A third reason for the VU is simply to make a profit. In the United States the educational marketplace is estimated to be approximately $735 billion US dollars. In 2002 the market for on-line education was approximately $9.4 billion with estimates of over $50 billion for 2003. Obviously, such a huge market has caught the attention of educational entrepreneurs, such as the University of Phoenix. Traditional, public universities also see the VU as a profit-making center to support other functions in a time of declining resources. Currently, in the US, approximately 78% of the public universities offer on-line coursework compared to about 19% of private universities. In total, 8% of all US universities offer degrees on-line through their VUs.

Whereas the University of Phoenix has become the largest for-profit university in the US, many public universities in the US have become noted for their failures in creating and sustaining a VU. The most notable failure in the US has been the US Open University, modeled after the British Open University. After continual and sustained losses of over $20 million the US Open University closed in 2002 after a short-lived, failed experience. Principal among the reasons for the failure were lack of name recognition among potential students and failure of the Open University to find a niche within US higher education. Whereas University of Phoenix markets primarily to older, working adults who wish to complete a bachelor's degree, the Open University found itself competing directly with traditional universities for younger students—most who preferred to attend a traditional campus with live interaction of fellow students. Another notable failure among attempts at Virtual Universities in the US is the Western Governor's University. Seemingly, because of the large distances between cities in the American West, the Governor's University was conceived as a joint project to provide virtual access to higher education for students living in the Western states. Similar to the US Open University, the Governor's University failed to find a niche within higher education and is currently struggling to survive. Because the Governor's University is connected directly to existing public universities and their curricular offerings (unlike the US Open University), the Governor's University is managing to survive by offering access to coursework not otherwise available to students who are already enrolled in member universities. Whereas the Governor's University has had to adapt its VU concept to survive, other VU consortia of US universities have also had to make the same accommodations. Columbia University (New York) and its Fathom Consortium is another example of a VU concept in the US that failed to make a profit. Although Columbia's VU consortium was not commercially viable, the concept has been revised and adapted to provide supporting coursework for students at member universities—similar to the change in focus the Governor's University has made to survive. Other US examples of failed VUs include New York University, Temple University, and the University of Maryland. At each institution the VU failed to make a profit, but on-line elements of the VU have been adapted to support the traditional curriculum.

Virtual Failures

Certainly, much can be learned from the

failures of the US Virtual Universities. Because most VUs in the US were created to make a profit and to increase institutional capacity, questions over increased access and educational success still remain. Initial evidence from student participation in VUs has shown an increase in drop-out rates from on-line or VU classes. Reasons for the higher failure rates of students in on-line courses appear due often to reports of "isolation" from students and lack of infrastructure to support their educational efforts. While on-line courses allow students to access lectures and information whenever they please, students complain of the lack of interaction with their fellow students and instructors. Whereas email and chat groups offer one avenue for interaction, many students find personal contact is still needed for them to gain from the educational experience and to feel they are participating in their education. Similarly, students note the lack of infrastructure to support them through a VU. Because traditional campuses have counselors, advisors and provide personal assistance for everything from course registration to medical help, VU students feel isolated and unsupported compared to their on-campus colleagues.

From the perspective of learning, students do not appear to be particularly advantaged or disadvantaged from on-line learning compared to on-campus learning. Initial research has tended to show no significant differences between the two forms of education (on-line vs. on-campus). Given, apparently, no or little significant differences between delivery methods, institutions must clearly define the purpose for on-line coursework or the creation of a VU. Critical among these decisions is determining how to assure access by all social classes and to insure quality of the educational experience and outcome for students.

Access to the Virtual University

A particularly vexing problem for the VU is assuring access for all social classes. The inherent problem for any on-line educational endeavor is to assure that students of all social classes have access to the VU. Obviously, students from lower social classes are less likely to have computers and internet access. A critical issue for VUs, therefore, is to maintain equity in providing access for students. If only upper class students have access to the high status knowledge (medicine, engineering, law, etc.) of universities and VUs, then lower class students are relegated to lower status knowledge and the lower income and prestige associated with this knowledge. Of course, not everyone can gain access to high status knowledge, but it is incumbent upon universities and VUs to assure that the brightest and most motivated students can gain access to high status knowledge.

Unfortunately, distribution of knowledge is disproportionately unavailable to students who are non-white, lower class, and from rural areas. Considerably higher percentages of whites have access to computers and to the Internet than blacks or Hispanics in the US. Similar gaps in access to educational resources between social classes and races in Brazil and other developing countries led Paulo Freire to write "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." Freire criticized the traditional form of education when it merely places knowledge in student's heads, as if making deposits into a bank. Freire found that the oppression of lower class and uneducated individuals was maintained by such education. Similarly, care must be taken in virtual education to assure that it is a democratic form of education that is available to a nation's full social and cultural constituency.

The distinct problem with the Virtual University when it simply replicates a banking concept of education is that it is incapable of providing an intellectual experience for its students. Furthermore, notions of citizenship, leadership, diplomacy, and democracy are notably absent in forms of education that merely distribute knowledge, as if it were a package or a commodity to be purchased. The notable failures of VUs have principally been caused by presenting an educational curriculum devoid of sufficient intellectual content

and merit to warrant students' involvement. The isolation many VU students feel is linked to the absence of social or cultural capital imparted by the VU. One of the most significant benefits for students of traditional universities is the capital they gain by meeting friends who will be their colleagues and associates after graduation.

The socialization students receive in traditional universities is critical in their future lives both in the US and Japan. Japanese university students, in particular, use their collegiate experience to gain social capital that benefits them throughout their lives. The social capital benefits accrued in college are also important for US students but to a differing degree than in Japan. Because a high proportion of US students work while in school and do not live at home, their socialization experiences are somewhat different from Japanese students. Similarly, Japanese VUs and online education have differing cultural issues to overcome than similar programs in the US.

The virtual nature of the VU does not enable the acculturation, socialization, and personal interaction that are basic to traditional universities. VUs, therefore, are only able to provide a narrowly defined and functional form of learning and education. Again, if only upperclass students are allowed access to the high status knowledge and acculturation of the traditional university, VU students are being denied equal access to the rewards of a university education. This, of course, is why so many VUs failed in the US, but the University of Phoenix has thrived. VUs were unable to capture the traditional aged market of university students who desired the socialization and acculturation traditional universities offer. The University of Phoenix, however, sells its education to older working adults who, for whatever reason, missed earlier socialization opportunities. How the VU can match both the educational and socialization advantages of on-campus programs is a critical question for the future of VUs.

Higher Education's Future

In charting the future of higher education, and the VU in particular, we must consider what type of university is needed. How will higher education help solve the social, economic, political, and environmental problems of the future? How does the role of higher education differ in Japan compared to the US? What types of institutions are needed to remediate the growing income inequality and racial tensions in the US? And, for Japan, what role should universities play in preserving and maintaining the cultural sovereignty of Japan. All these issues are critical for the future of higher education, in general, but specifically for the role VUs will play in association with traditional universities. The emerging strength of VUs appears to be their role as a supplement to traditional higher education. Additionally, VUs are able to serve the needs of older, working professionals who are not in need of the socialization of on-campus programs for younger students.

Private, for-profit VUs have the advantage of addressing a more narrowly defined student population across state and national boundaries and are not confined to serving the democratic, social, and cultural needs of their students. Public institutions, however, have the burden of promoting national identity, encouraging the study of disinterested science, and serving as vehicles of social and economic development for the public good. Private VUs need worry only about making a profit and can plan their curricula accordingly in service of the private good compared to the need of serving the public good by state or national universities.

Conclusion

I conclude my discussion and critique of the Virtual University by posing a number of questions regarding its future role in higher education. My questions relate both to the future of higher education for Japan and the US and also for developing countries. As I have discussed, public universities have social and economic obligations within a society.

Both developing and developed nations alike are struggling to define the role higher education should play in ameliorating the unique social problems of their respective countries. In democracies, higher education has a distinct role of fostering intellectual exchange, preserving the culture, and democratizing the population.

From a postcolonial perspective, it is also the role of the university to assure a culturally appropriate education that questions the grand narrative of the past and the hegemony of the colonial powers—both of the East and West. From a postmodern perspective issues of equity and access are paramount in the role higher education should play within a society that moves beyond modernism and embraces a postcolonial perspective.

What then are the vital questions that should be considered as we ponder the future of Virtual Universities and online education in developed and developing countries? In particular, for the focus of our discussion today, we should ask what are the major problems VUs are solving for Japan? That is, what is the solution for which VUs are being developed? Are VUs even the appropriate answer? Furthermore, we should ask how the Virtual University is part of the future for higher education and under what conditions will it successfully create this future? Will VUs act independently in their future role of higher education, or is their most appropriate function to be an addendum to traditional forms of higher education?

Finally, I would like to reiterate my principal concern over equity and access for Virtual Universities and online education. I believe it is critical that we consider who will be the beneficiaries of Virtual Universities. Who will teach and who will learn are key questions we must consider in the future of higher education and Virtual Universities. If Virtual Universities are proposed as a way to improve the educational outcomes for all students, then we must consider who will benefit from this new technology and if the VU does indeed improve the educational outcomes for students from the full spectrum of social classes. In the future of higher education I am concerned over who will be allowed access to traditional, high status knowledge and who will be relegated only to the Virtual University. A danger inherent for students who are allowed access only to VUs is that they will be denied entry to the more prestigious, traditional forms of higher education. The high status knowledge at traditional universities should not only be available to upper-class students. Likewise, lower-class students should not be relegated only to a higher education through Virtual Universities. Virtual Universities should be a compliment to the high status knowledge provided by traditional universities, not only as a less prestigious alternative to students who are unable to gain access to the top levels of education.

Virtual Universities do have a bright future as a supplement to traditional forms of higher education for traditional-aged college students (18 to 25) and as continuing education for professionals. Because higher education in a democracy should provide high-status knowledge and training to advance and to preserve the nation's culture, social, and economic infrastructure, Virtual Universities do have the potential for playing a distinct role in the future of higher education. What this role will be and how it will be developed is, of course, the purpose of the symposium today.